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ABSTRACT

Following a brief history of literacy from the dawn of civilization in Egypt to the founding of the community college movement in the United States in 1945-55, this paper describes the Guided Studies Program at Clackamas Community College. The aim of the program is to increase literacy, which is viewed as a means to help students' self improvement by increasing their ability to express desires and opinions coherently and convey feelings about themselves positively. Every student is pretested upon entrance to the college to determine the eligibility for admittance into regular courses. Those students not achieving a minimum score on the American College Test or the Scholastic Aptitude Test, approximately 20-25% of all students, are strongly directed and counseled into the Guided Studies Program. The program consists of three components: a testing phase; counseling, to advise students into a program tailored to meet their individual needs; and a humanities experience which introduces the student to the world of the arts. As a result of this program, the attrition rate for the lower quartile of the student population was reduced by 75%, and students' sense of individual responsibility increased. A discussion of the role of the general academic faculty in maintaining high academic standards, a table outlining indicators used to determine skill deficiency and level-appropriate courses, and a bibliography are included. (HB)

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# COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND LITERACY

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# COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND LITERACY

DONALD B. EPSTEIN

## I

Any proposal to increase the literacy skills of community college students must recognize and incorporate the non-traditional nature of these students. It must recognize that most of these students use the community college as a vehicle for self-improvement and social and economic mobility through occupational training rather than completing a baccalaureate degree. However, this training must include literacy both for the technical demands of most jobs today and for the increasing flexibility in contemporary career patterns.

Literacy will help students' self-improvement by increasing their ability to express desires and opinions coherently and to make feelings about themselves come out in a positive manner. This is not an easy task, and any literacy program, if it is to succeed, must be candid with students. They must be told, at the outset, of the time involved to improve literacy skills. They must be made aware that two years of community college training may encompass three to four years' work for those deficient in basic academic skills. Students must be intensively counseled on a one-to-one basis and be made to see, through a special course or other aid, that they are

primarily responsible for their own success or failure. Students must be tested and evaluated before any meaningful counseling can occur and the college must commit its resources to aiding this program.

II

Literacy has been the traditional way of exerting power by a segment of the population concerned with perpetuating its privileged status by monopolizing essential knowledge. Usually this knowledge involved a religious or state function; a priesthood could interpret omens from the heavens or derive laws from a deity and transcribe inventory records into permanent form either on papyrus or stone. From the dawn of civilization in Egypt and Mesopotamia, those who possessed skills in literacy were raised to the highest positions in the state. Indeed, no state can exist for any length of time in a permanent location without written records of families and boundaries. The art of writing was second in importance only to warrior skills for ancient societies. Every advanced culture in the world which developed into a flourishing and lasting civilization has had to develop a written language.

But this written language was not a broadly based skill. On the contrary, the skill was often interwoven with taboos regulating the spread of secrets of a scribal

class. Education was thus confined to an upper crust of state officials, religious leaders and scribes with the masses left out of the secrets. Learning was entirely private until very late in antiquity and state support of literacy training was unthinkable. Still, a literary culture dominated the world of learning by the time of Greece and Rome. Long and complex works of poetry and philosophy were transcribed and stored in libraries though practical access to these sources was restricted to those who could read. Popular culture was transmitted orally.

In the medieval period no substantial change in this pattern occurred except to restrict the sources of literacy to Christian culture, excluding a broad category of tales from Greece and Rome. A priestly class held an almost exclusive monopoly of literacy with few exceptions. Indeed, the Germanic rulers of Europe scoffed at reading as being only fit for priests. The technology of literacy has not changed since the days of Egypt. The majority of manuscripts being produced were recorded on either vellum or papyrus, a slow and expensive process of reproduction. Public education was confined to cathedral schools and was mainly for those who were destined for the priesthood.

However, in the high Middle Ages, first in Italy, and later in Northern Europe, a profound change was occurring that would upset two millenia of literary tradition. This was the result of the rise of a new type of person,

the middle class merchant, and a new technology of literacy. This change was not brought about by the invention of printing as most people would suppose. It was heralded by the discovery and introduction to the West of the Chinese art of papermaking. The Italian merchants, by the twelfth century, had developed an international commerce with the Orient which necessitated new forms of business techniques such as insurance contracts. The record-keeping function of business exploded exponentially until trade would have otherwise been stifled by the lack of a receptor medium. (Remember that it took seven hundred sheep to produce enough vellum for one Bible.) Paper making solved the immediate medium problem; and the business community assumed responsibility for educating a new sort of person, literate in the practical skills of letter writing and business record keeping. Merchants established their own schools for training clerks (the name of course deriving from the clergy, but not taking on a secular meaning).

These schools began to produce new textbooks such as the ars dictaminis, the art of letter writing (later medieval students would carry these not only into the merchant schools, but into the new universities as well). An entirely new body of students appeared in Europe starting in the thirteenth century. These were essentially sons of illiterate but successful peasants who wished to join the ranks of the city merchants. As the demand for

literacy increased among the merchant class the need for skilled teachers appeared as well, thus causing an even greater demand for literary training. The invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century only added fuel to this fire of demand by sharply reducing the cost of reproducing books on the paper medium. Indeed the cost of school texts was reduced by 99%.

When we add the sixteenth century development in religious thought to the technology of literacy, the mixture produces a greater desire and determination to read and write. First of all, the Protestant revolution led by Luther and Calvin emphasized the religious necessity of Bible reading for salvation, thus making literacy for the masses a holy duty. In Catholic areas the same spirit of religious literacy prevailed with corresponding movements to increase literacy. In addition both religious groups wanted to convert the newly discovered American Indians and spread the faith to the new continent.

A shaping influence upon American historical events in the seventeenth century was the settlers' predisposition to found schools. New England became the center of this movement. There, new universities were established to train ministers, but these ministers came from quite ordinary backgrounds by European standards. A pre-college school was necessary to teach these hitherto illiterate people elementary literacy for Bible reading.

In addition, New England's democratic political atmosphere, with its town meetings and broad-based Church governance, necessitated literate citizens and congregants.

Every New England town had a common school to teach elementary reading. This school was supported by public taxes on land and was run by a school committee elected by the townspeople. The curriculum was slanted heavily towards the moral and Protestant, but secular scholarship prevailed. This movement came to be expanded in the early nineteenth century to embrace the newly arriving Irish immigrants. Horace Mann, the Boston school superintendant of the 1820's, had a vision of universal educational systems extending through adolescence, giving every child literacy skills as well as instruction in American citizenship and vocational advantages. Further, this trend was fed by the growing spirit of nationalism and western expansion in America, which needed new people from Europe to mold into new Americans. Poverty stricken Irish, Germans, Italians and Jews responded eagerly to the idea of a free public education, an upper class prerogative in Europe. Moreover, each of these cultures had an historic tradition which respected the word as divine and the scholar as saintly. It took little convincing to persuade these new citizens to support public education and to discipline their children to accept the rigors of the schoolhouse.

Even beyond the elementary education given in the local school, Americans desired a greater chance to participate in a community of learning. College education, restricted to a small class of people before the American Revolution and only used for training ministers, physicians and lawyers, was given a democratic impetus from the beginnings of the nation. Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia as a public non-sectarian school in the 1790's. The University of Pennsylvania, founded by Benjamin Franklin, was established for the purpose of training poor youth to the highest degree. The open door to college was not a twentieth century idea, but a nineteenth century concept incorporated in two events. First, the City College of New York was founded in 1840, fostering the principle of a free college for local residents unable to attend private schools for reasons of finance. Second, the Morrill Act (1868) established land grant colleges to train the rural population in useful knowledge, thus beginning the connection between higher education and the practical and vocational skills such as agriculture and mechanical engineering. Both land grant colleges and city colleges had an "open door"; any high school graduate was eligible to attend.

To both these institutions flocked the sons of immigrants and farmers, eager to learn new skills which would propel them into the middle class and into secure

jobs. It was a far cry from Oxford and Cambridge, but from the pragmatic American point of view, it worked. Old jobs considered beneath the dignity of Europeans came to have new status with an American college degree behind them. This, coupled with an almost unbroken economic expansion lasting into the 1920's, made college training tantamount to economic success. After World War II, this economic boom continued to create a demand for technically trained students in all fields with, again, unlimited job possibilities. New money was obtained for education through federal assistance starting with the National Student Administration in the 1930's and continuing with the G.I. Bill and scholarship grants.

The supply of money available from federal and local sources created a demand for educational services which even the expansion-minded colleges could not keep up with. Thus the impetus was given for the founding of the community college movement during the period 1945-1955. Although junior colleges had existed for a long time in some communities, the idea of a comprehensive college embracing both academic and technical-vocational education was new. Further, this new idea was tied to existing political divisions for school districts, often making the college an adjunct to the local high school.

But the problems began to arise. Starting with the 1960's and continuing to the present, several new factors

came into being which made the job of the new comprehensive community college far different from its earlier models, the city and land grant colleges. First of all, the student population began declining for the first time in history. Birth rates dwindled in the 1950's and reached a zero growth rate by the late 1960's. No longer could an ever-growing population be counted on to expand educational institutions. Second, the saturation point had been reached in higher education: almost all qualified students were attending a postsecondary school by 1970. The second and third generation of college students were emerging from the pioneering efforts of the city and land grant colleges. These students assumed that they would go to college, not as a rare privilege, but as a right. Furthermore, this group was not expanding but, in fact, was declining in numbers. If the colleges were to survive, especially the newly founded community colleges which did not have the academic or technical reputation of the older schools, then a new clientele had to be found.

III

And this clientele was indeed forthcoming. It was produced by the very technology that the four-year schools created. Automation began to eliminate traditional unskilled manual labor jobs, thus displacing millions of workers and leaving their offspring with no hope of entering the local

mill at 18. These individuals quickly perceived the new community colleges as a way out of poverty or deadend jobs into new careers, but they had no idea of what that education encompassed. An increasingly problematic social order brought students from diverse backgrounds. Next, a brief surge was created by the unpopular Vietnam war which both offered exemption from the draft for college students and, at the same time, gave money to veterans; however, reduced benefits for attending college made the community college the only alternative.

Thus, the combination of history, economics, war, and a changing learning environment led to a new student population which has to cope with the demands of higher education without a background in academic training. Added to this is the fact that a new technology of learning rendered many students incapable of using traditional academic skills. The widespread use of television and films after World War II led to a decline in reading: most people gained their news and entertainment not from the Guttenburg medium but from the electronic screen. Concommitant with educational demands of the new students was the fact that often these students could not read at levels formerly thought to be minimally acceptable for college students. Today, these problems are not confined to the community college but present a trend recognized by all colleges. Community colleges, however, by their

very nature as open-door institutions attract students with skill levels below those of four-year schools. The different cultural background and value for education and the problems of returning students create an abyss between the traditional expectations of higher education and the newer realities of unprepared students.

The educational problems associated with these events are complex, dealing with educational policy and expectations, individual psychology, and cultural phenomena. The aspect of pedagogy best treated is an area that we, as teachers, can affect to the greatest degree--learning disabilities. First of all, there must be a recognition of the problem and its causes. We are not dealing with traditional students, but ones who come from an environment where learning is at a distinct disadvantage. They are not ready to read or write or compete at anywhere near a college level. And we cannot hope to teach them subject matter on the college level unless we are prepared to treat their differences. Placing them directly into college level classes leads only to dilution of course materials or to a frustrating phenomena of attrition.

IV

The best example that I know of dealing with this problem is a Guided Studies Program recently instituted on an experimental basis at Clackamas Community College

(Oregon), under the direction of Mr. Kent Heaton of the Counseling Department. It is a program that deliberately leaves out all reference to remediation. First of all, it acknowledges a fact about community colleges long recognized but never used--that our students are from a wide range of abilities and go to school for a wide variety of reasons. Thus, we pretest every student upon entrance to the college, regardless of the number of hours taken or courses chosen. A basic literacy level is required in order for a student to be admitted into regular courses of any curriculum. If a minimum score is not achieved either by the American College Test or by the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the student is strongly directed and counseled into the Guided Studies Program (see Table 1). The scores on these national tests or on those administered by the college counseling and mathematics departments are used to place students in appropriate courses. What we have found at Clackamas is that about 20-25% of all students (vocational and academic) are eligible for this program.

The program consists of three components. After the testing phase comes an intense period of individual counseling in which students are advised into a program tailored to their individual needs. For example, we find that some students can achieve basic literacy but not computational skills; those students would be allowed to take a college level writing course but would be required to take a

remedial course in arithmetic. It is the rare student that does not possess some basic skills but many do not possess all the skills necessary for entry level college work. There are a variety of courses and programs available at Clackamas to fulfill students' needs, ranging from formal remedial English courses which carry no college credit to individual tutoring by peers. There are laboratories devoted to programmed learning, designed to improve writing, math skills and reading comprehension.

But the Guided Studies Program does not end here. In addition to the courses, the program recognizes the new student's uncertainty in entering a new learning environment. The program acknowledges that the individuals most in need of help are those who often have the greatest psychological barriers to success. To help them, all students in the Guided Studies Program are required to take a new type of psychology course which carries college credit. "Psychology of Personality" is taught by the counseling department. The aim of the course is the individual recognition of self and the assumption of responsibility for actions. Often these students have gone through life blaming parents, teachers, or spouses for their failure and have never recognized their own responsibility for their actions. This course is designed to alter that view and asks the students truly to look at themselves for the first time in their lives.

The third phase of this program is designed to overcome the cultural barriers to education. This part seeks to make the student comfortable in a new world of learning and to ease the transition from street corner to classroom. Basically, Clackamas Community College has designed a course called "Humanities Experience" which introduces the student to the world of the arts, literature, and history through local experiences such as folklore, historic building tours, free concerts, and plays. It attempts to bring the community's cultural and historical resources into being; students, often for the first time in their lives, are made to recognize that their community has a life not linked to mere survival but attached to the highest aspirations of all humankind. "Culture" is not an alien term reserved for the rich and well educated but belongs to everybody, including themselves, for they are part of a rich cultural heritage that ancestors, from whatever world region, brought to this country and made a part of a new cultural system.

The results of this experiment so far have been heartening. First of all, Clackamas was faced with the traditional problem of high attrition in the lower quartile of the student population. Up to 95% of these individuals simply gave up and left college. Those that went to regular classes and struggled often inflicted their

problems on the classes, forcing teachers to lower expectations and dilute courses so as to help those who were floundering. By removing them from the mainstream of academic and vocational courses, teachers can increase aims for academic performance and not lose those students who feel that simplistic teaching reduces the community college to the level of a glorified high school. By giving these problem students special attention and courses, their attrition rate has been reduced by 75%. Further, because of the requirement that all Guided Studies students take the course on personality, a new sense of responsibility is being developed. Questionnaires administered by the college to students after one term have indicated that this phase--the individual responsibility--has had the greatest impact on their lives.

Also enrollment has increased in the "Humanities Experience" course; here vocational students are induced to take college level history and literature courses as part of their general education. The effect, hopefully, will be a positive one for the college as a whole; when these students enter the regular program and stay the full two years, the faculty will be able to work with them to the greatest extent of their abilities. By reducing the attrition rate, the costs of the program (which are substantial because of the time involved and

the low student/teacher ratio that remedial classes demand) will be repaid through increased FTE over longer periods of time.

IV

A word now about the general academic faculty. Literacy is not the prime responsibility of the counseling department or the reading laboratory or the English department. It is the job of every instructor to set an example. And this can only be accomplished by more hard work added to an already burdensome schedule. Teachers must require their students to write essay examinations and to read the books in the library. They must enforce strict grammatical rules if only to impress students with the importance of form as well as content. Every teacher must volunteer to help the English, reading and counseling departments in doing their job of bringing up the skill levels of students. And above all teachers must not give up and despair about their students. It does us no good to say that we are given the lowest half of the lot or the worst academic achievers. We must use all the force of our knowledge and abilities to bring up the skill level of the students we have. To do otherwise would be to make the community college an adjunct of the social welfare system, with teachers acting as adult babysitters.

Rather than that, all teachers must insist on high standards and be prepared to work with students over a long period to achieve those standards. Personally I have found that, in the long run, students will respect and learn more from those teachers who are willing to demand much of them but who are not aloof from addressing the special needs of people entering a new world of learning for the first time. Teachers should try to relate more to their students by seeing what skills students possess and using those skills in class. For example, I suspect, that many an English teacher who can turn out a fine English sentence cannot fix an automobile. Many a learned historian cannot read a welding textbook without a sense of frustration at not understanding the language. By relating English, social science and humanities courses to students' lives, perhaps a better way can be achieved at making learning more pleasant and joyful.

The community college can and, indeed, must be a place where high academic standards apply. Most insist that these standards must be supported in a way that takes into account the special nature of the people involved. The faculty must be prepared to sacrifice time in order to achieve these high standards and the college administration must commit the money necessary for excellence to prevail.

Table 1

INDICATORS USED TO DETERMINE SKILL DEFICIENCY AND LEVEL-APPROPRIATE COURSES AT CLACKAMAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

| Test Scores | | Clackamas C.C. Course |
|---|---|---|
| **American College Test** | | |
| English | 0-14% | WR 11 (Remedial English) |
| | 15-27% | WR 12 (Fundamentals of English) |
| | 28-29% | WR 121 (English Composition) |
| | 90-100% | Honors English |
| Mathematics | 0-10% | Mth 14 (Remedial Arithmetic) |
| | 11-24% | Mth 20, 21 (Fundamentals of Algebra) |
| | 25-38% | Mth 95 (Intermediate Algebra) |
| | 39-64% | Mth 101 (College Algebra) |
| | 65-89% | Mth 102 or 200 (Trigonometry or Calculus) |
| | 90-99% | Mth 200 (Calculus) |
| **Scholastic Aptitude Test** | | |
| English | -350 | WR 11 (Remedial English) |
| | 350-450 | WR 12 (Fundamentals of English) |
| | 450-700 | WR 121 (English Composition) |
| | 700- | Honors English |
| Mathematics | 0-9 | Mth 14 (Remedial Arithmetic) |
| | 10-14 | Mth 15 (Refresher Mathematics |
| | 15-25 | Mth 20, 21 (Fundamentals of Algebra) |
| | 26-32 | Mth 95 (Intermediate Algebra) |
| | 33-41 | Mth 101 (College Algebra) |
| | 42-50 | Mth 200 (Calculus) |
| **Comparative Guidance and Placement Program Examination** | | |
| English | -38 | WR 10 (Remedial English--tutorial) |
| | 39-43 | WR 11 (Remedial English) |
| | 45-49 | WR 12 (Fundamentals of English) |
| | 51- | WR 121 (English Composition) |
| Reading | 0-37 | Rd 11 (Developmental Reading I) |
| | 38-44 | Rd 12 (Developmental Reading II) |
| | 45-48 | Rd 13 (Developmental Reading III) |
| | 49-60 | Eng 115 (Effective Reading) |
| **Department Constructed Mathematics Test** | | |
| | 0-12 | Mth 14 (Remedial Arithmetic) |
| | 13-18 | Mth 15 (Refresher Mathematics) |
| | 19-25 | Mth 20, 21 (Fundamentals of Algebra) |
| | 26-32 | Mth 95 (Intermediate Algebra) |
| | 33-38 | Mth 101 (College Algebra) |
| | 39-42 | Math 102 (Trigonometry or Calculus) |
| | 43- | Mth 200 (Calculus) |

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